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ABSTRACT

Photojournalism research includes the resurrection and editing of historic, seldom-seen photographs. A sample of this kind of research is a project at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock that involves selecting photographic material from a little-seen National Archives collection of pictures from the files of the War Relocation Authority, an agency charged with the removal and incarceration of more than 110,000 Japanese-Americans during World War II. The photographs selected for the project are of two camps in Arkansas, the Jerome and Rohwer Relocation Centers, and show various aspects of the camps and camp life. The project involves the selection of photographic material from the collection and its transference to black and white slides for use in combination with a narrative sound track created from interviews with some of the original photographic subjects. In addition, the project calls for new photographs to be taken of the remains of the camps. (MKM)

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Photojournalism Division

JEROME AND ROHWER RELOCATION CENTERS: A DESCRIPTION OF A PROJECT OF SELECTED PHOTOGRAPHS OF CAMP LIFE

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Photojournalism research runs the gamut from technological, biographical, legal and ethical studies, to surveys and analyses of picture placement, picture effectiveness and reader picture preference.

But photojournalism research also includes the resurrection and editing of historic, seldom seen photographs.

A sample of that kind of archival research is a $10,000 project funded to the University of Arkansas at Little Rock in part under a grant from the Arkansas Endowment for the Humanities. The project involves selecting photographic material from a little seen National Archives collection, and transferring the selected material to 2x2 slides in combination with a narrative sound track created from interviews with some of the original subjects of the Archives material.

The National Archives material is part of a 12,600 picture collection from the War Relocation Authority files. The WRA was a hastily organized government agency charged with the removal and incarceration of more than 110,000 Japanese Americans during World War Two.[1]

The evacuated Japanese Americans, two thirds of whom were American citizens by birth, were divided into four categories: Issei (first generation, and aliens by law or choice), Nisei (second generation and American citizens by birth), Sansei (third generation and American citizens by birth), and Kibei (those who received part or all of their education in Japan).

The Japanese Americans, most of whom were American citizens from California, Oregon and Washington, were incarcerated in 10 relocation centers. Two of those centers--Jerome and Rohwer--were located in southeastern Arkansas and housed about 17,000 persons when the facilities were at peak capacity.[2]

A slide portrait of those camps is the focal point of the study.

Jerome Relocation Center, located on about 10,000 acres of Farm Security Administration land near the town of Jerome (straddling Chicot and Drew Counties), opened officially on Oct. 6, 1942. It reached a peak population about four months later, with 8,497 residents. The last residents left (mainly for other camps, including nearby Rohwer) on June 30, 1944, making Jerome the first of the relocation centers to close.[3] Its closing was short lived, however. In October, 1944, the center was renamed Camp Dermott and reopened to house as many as 7,000 German prisoners of war--mostly officers and mostly from Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps.[4] The camp closed again in the summer of 1946.

Rohwer, about 30 miles from Jerome, was also located on about 10,000 acres of FSA land, although the land was more wooded and swampy than the Jerome property. The center was opened Sept. 18, 1942, reached its peak six months later with 8,475 residents, and closed on Nov. 30, 1945.[5]

The project was funded because the portrait of Jerome and Rohwer Relocation Centers is part of the national and state heritage, and needs to be told, and told quickly. The centers are now gone (Jerome) or disintegrating (Rohwer), and the former residents are few and elderly, their memories fading.

Still vivid, however, is the Jerome and Rohwer WRA photographic collection of between 500 and 1,000 black and white negatives, mostly in 4x5 format. A few negatives are 5x7.

The Jerome and Rohwer photographs, stored as 4x5 proofs in cardboard boxes in the Archives, are divided into two categories and one subcategory. Each center is a separate category. Within the Rohwer category, some pictures are subcategorized as photographs not intended for public dissemination. In most cases, the photographs in this special subcategory were segregated because they were taken by visitors or center residents and are of poor quality. The quality of 80 per cent of the other photographs is excellent, with deep depth of field and careful lighting.

Some of the photographs in the main categories are not complimentary to the United States government, which suggests that the WRA took a laissez faire view of the photographic record being made of camp life. One series, for instance, shows the headless body of a Rohwer resident who had committed suicide by laying his head across a railroad track in the face of an oncoming train.[6]

Most of the Jerome-Rohwer collection is from Jerome, the first camp to close. The pictures tend to fall into three categories: the opening of the camp, typical camp life and the closing of the camp. Most of the best pictures deal with the camp closing. The Rohwer pictures are almost uniformly poor, both technically and from a subject matter standpoint.

The photographers include Hikaru Iwasaki, Gretchen Van Tassel, Tom Parker, Charles E. Mace, Charles R. Lynn, Tom Okano and Fred Yamaguchi.

Other unidentified photographers may have their work in the file because not all of the contact prints in the WRA Record Group carry credit lines.

All of the photographers except Yamaguchi apparently were WRA employees based in Denver. Yamaguchi's picture cutlines suggest he was an internee at Rohwer, because all of his pictures are in the segregated subcategory of the collection.

To select the 150 pictures to be used in the slide program, the 500 to 1,000 pictures were edited three times at the National Archives over a four month period.

The first edit was to eliminate pictures of obvious poor quality. About 200 pictures lacking focus, adequate contrast or with blurred movement were immediately eliminated. The second edit concentrated on picking the most creative angle from series in which more than one angle was presented. When the third and final edit began, only about 300 pictures remained.

The best 150 pictures were selected on story content, dramatic impact and overall composition, based on a subjective rating scale.

The 150 pictures selected included work from all seven identified photographers. However, the photographers best represented were Parker, Iwasaki and Mace, in the order of the number of selected photographs.

(Parker, who died in the mid 1970s, was a photographer for several depression-era federal agencies before joining the WRA. Iwasaki, better known as Carl Iwasaki, was an amateur hired by the WRA. He lives in Denver now and is a free-lancer for Life, Time, Sports Illustrated and Business Week. Mace, who also died in the mid 1970s, was a former Denver Post and Rocky Mountain News photographer.)

Each of these three photographers showed a different approach to the task of recording center life.

These different approaches are consistent with the WRA's apparently relaxed attitude toward the Arkansas photographic project. The different approaches are also consistent with the notion that this type of photography is usually the byproduct of reciprocating relationships among subjects, photographers, employing agencies and audiences, as richly illustrated by Karin Becker Ohrn, in her study of the work done by Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams at Manzanar Relocation Center.[7]

The WRA photographers in Arkansas, then, probably brought varying attitudes to their assignments, worked under different instructions from their employer, handled their subjects differently and most obviously, produced singularly different kinds of photographs.

Parker concentrated on camp aerials and carefully posed portraits of residents. Iwasaki was the most subjective of the three, his pictures concentrating on human expression and suggesting at times strong editorial overtones (such as RG 210, I 160, which shows a sign warning internees not to steal lumber lest they be fined or imprisoned). Mace seemed to concentrate on crowds, and shot many sweeping vistas of the closing of Jerome.

Each photographer seemed to have visited both camps, staying for about one week each time, according to the dates indicated on the back of the pictures.

The entire Arkansas collection, of course, crosses the thin line between photojournalism and documentary photography because many of the pictures--although primarily for record purposes--were first used photojournalistically in U. S. newspapers and magazines to help the government illustrate camp life.

The grant provided for copying 150 of these National Archives photographs onto 2x2 black and white slide material, and for additional new photography at Jerome and Rohwer, Ark., sites of the remains of the centers.

The new photography, not yet done, will detail the remains of the camps: at Jerome, a water tower, and at Rohwer, some buildings, foundations and a graveyard. Where possible, photographs will be made from similar positions as the WRA photographs.

While photographic material is being acquired and produced, an oral historian at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, using the Japanese American Citizens League and local resources, is locating former center residents who are still living in Arkansas. The thrust of this part of the study is to interview Japanese Americans detained in the state who then decided to remain in spite of a hostile environment. As of this date, of the 17,000 Japanese Americans detained in the Arkansas centers, only two remain in the state. The quality of the interviews--which are not yet transcribed--will determine whether additional interview material will have to be developed.

The audio tapes of the interviews will be edited and re-recorded to yield a narration for the slides. Then the slides and tape (using multiple projectors on a television film chain) will be recorded onto broadcast quality videotape.

The picture and word mix--yet to be done--will be completed at a Little Rock television station, using four inch quadruplex recording equipment. The four inch color master tape will be dubbed down to smaller formats for presentation in schools and libraries.

The videotape format is being used, rather than the traditional multiple slide projectors with dissolve unit, to facilitate ease of presentation.

The videotape, running roughly 20 minutes, will be used initially on a one-hour public affairs program to be aired on statewide education television sometime in 1980.

After the videotape is shown, a panel of discussants will deal with the historical, social, political and legal conditions which led to the establishment of the centers.

After the television program is presented, the 20 minute tape and the National Archives slides (with researched captions) will be deposited in the humanities resource center of the Arkansas Endowment for the Humanities for statewide distribution.

Through photographs, the Rohwer and Jerome Relocation Centers will open their doors again, to provide Americans of the 1980s with a gritty glimpse of--at best--national paranoia, and--at worst--a national tragedy.[8]

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FOOTNOTES

1. Carey McWilliams, What About Our Japanese-Americans? (New York: 1944), 1.

2. The eight other WRA relocation centers were Central Utah at Abraham, Utah; Colorado River, 17 miles south of Parker, Ariz.; Gila River near Sacaton, Ariz.; Granada, one mile west of Granada, Colo.; Heart Mountain, located along highway 14A between Cody and Powell, Wyo.; Manzanar, near Independence, Calif.; Tule Lake in Modoc County, Calif. and Minidoka in Jerome County, Idaho. Tule Lake was a segregation center for Issei, Kibei and some Nisei. More than two thirds of those at Jerome and Rohwer Relocation Centers were Nisei and Sansei. "Executive Order No. 9066," J. L. Dewitt, Final Report--Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast, 1942 (Washington, D. C.: 1943), 249-263.

3. U. S. Department of the Interior, WRA, A Story of Human Conservation, (Washington, D. C.: 1946), 197.

4. Merrill R. Pritchett and William L. Shea, "The Afrika Korps in Arkansas, 1943-1946," Arkansas Historical Quarterly, (Fayetteville, Ark.: Autumn, 1978), 3-22.

5. U. S. Department of the Interior, op. cit., 197.

6. The dead man was John Yoshiada, 23. Record Group 210G, Box 9, photographs K514-K518.

7. Karin Becker Ohrn, "What You See Is What You Get: Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams at Manzanar," Journalism History, (Spring, 1977). 14-22 and p. 32.

8. The federal tragedy was compounded by the State of Arkansas, which legislatively discouraged Japanese Americans from remaining in the state after the relocation centers closed. The state legislature passed a bill in 1943 prohibiting alien and citizen Japanese from owning land in Arkansas. The bill's sponsor, B. Frank Williams, said he wanted to make sure that "no Japs can stay in this state. . . ." William Cary Anderson, "Early Reaction in Arkansas to the Relocation of Japanese in the State," Arkansas Historical Quarterly, (Fayetteville, Ark.. Autumn, 1964), 195-211.

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"The Evacuated People."

"The Wartime Handling of Evacuee Property."

"Legal and Constitution Phases of the WRA Program."

"Community Government in War Relocation Centers."

"People in Motion; The Post-War Adjustment of the Evacuated Japanese Americans."

Selected Photographs From
Jerome and Rohwer Relocation Centers

1. RG 210G, G 214. Rohwer Relocation Center dentist treats resident. (WRA photo by Hikaru Iwasaki, 11/18/43.)

2. RG 210G, CR 45-12. Seasonal workers from Rohwer Relocation Center wait aboard one of two special train coaches for transport to pick peaches in Grand Junction, Colo. (Center photo by Fred Yamaguchi, 8/14/43.)

3. RG 210 G, CR 122. Nisei soldiers from the 442nd Regimental Combat Team stationed at nearby Camp Shelby, Miss., visit interned girls at the USO at Rohwer Relocation Center. (Center photo by unknown photographer, 3/44.)

4. RG 210 G, E 786. Jerome physician Dr. Fugikawa examines patient S. Ego with fluoroscope. (WRA photo by Tom Parker, 3/11/43.)

5. RG 210 G, K 517. Headless body of Jerome Relocation Center resident, John Yoshiada, 23, a suicide. (WRA photo by unknown photographer, 1/44.)

6. RG 210 G, I 166. A farewell dance is held for Jerome Relocation Center residents. (WRA photo by Hikaru Iwasaki, 6/14/44.)

7. RG 210 G, H 439. Child says goodbye to his pet dog before he and his family are transported to Relocation Center in Arizona, following closing of Jerome Relocation Center. (WRA photo by Charles E. Mace, 6/21/44.)

8. RG 210 G, I 153. Harry Shiramizu, editor of the semi-weekly Denson Tribune at Jerome Relocation Center, puts out the last edition as the Center closes. (WRA photo by Hikaru Iwasaki, 6/16/44.)

9. RG 210 G, I 169. The principal of Denson High School — the secondary school for Jerome Relocation Center — checks football helmet inventory prior to closing the school. (WRA photo by Hikaru Iwasaki, 6/14/44.)

10. RG 210 G, H 480. Jerome Relocation Center residents are loaded aboard a truck for a trip to a train which will take them to Relocation Center in Arizona. (WRA photo by Charles E. Mace, 6/13/44.)

11. RG210 G, H 449. Thousands of Jerome Relocation Center residents wave goodbye to friends being sent to Arizona as Jerome Relocation Center closes. (WRA photo by Charles E. Mace, 6/18/44.)

12. RG 210 G, I 174. Mother and child aboard train leaving Jerome Relocation Center wave goodbye to friends. (WRA photo by Hikaru Iwasaki, 6/19/44.)

13. RG 210 G, I 160. As Jerome Relocation Center closes, signs are erected warning residents not to take lumber. (WRA photo by Hikaru Iwasaki, 6/20/44.)